

MISCELLANEOUS.

THE NATURAL-HISTORY COLLECTIONS AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

SOMEBODY has said that the English people are a great people, not so much in consequence of what they say and do, as in consequence of what they leave unsaid and undone. British reserve (next to the British lion) is supposed to be the main-stay of the British constitution. Unfortunately, as in our social habits so in our public proceedings, we are given to carry this virtue to an excess; so that our light instead of shining as it should do before other nations, too often glimmers ignominiously under a bushel—invisible to the eye of even the natives themselves. A singular illustration of this is to be found in the Reports of the Keepers of the Zoological and Mineralogical Collections of the British Museum contained in the Blue Book just published by order of the House of Commons.

Every naturalist is acquainted with the magnificent zoological collection contained in those galleries of the British Museum which are *above* the level of the bases of the columns of the façade, but few are aware of the existence of a no less admirable collection in the vaults *below*, consisting of osteological and spirit specimens, not merely supplementary to the dried skins above, but for the zoological student the necessary complement and explanation of the latter. The spectator wandering through the galleries, as he looks at the stuffed skins glancing at him from all sides with their speculationless eyes, little thinks that, could each speak, it would address him very much in the words of the resurrectionized damsel immortalized by Hood:

“As for my *bones*, they’re all pack’d up
To go by Pickford’s van.”

And yet so it is: thanks to the zeal and energy of the indefatigable keeper of the department, Dr. Gray, the bones belonging to every skin are in the catacombs below, labeled and marked and ready to be exhibited, like the works of a clock beside its case, whenever room can be made for them.

But let the reports of Dr. Gray and Mr. Waterhouse speak for themselves:—

“British Museum, December 12th, 1851.”

“Mr. Gray begs to state to the Trustees, in case any additions should be made to the present buildings, that it is very desirable that some more rooms should be assigned to the Zoological department for the exhibition of the collection of animals in spirits, and of the osteological collection, which are now arranged in the basement, and consequently are in some measure hidden from the public, who are constantly inquiring after them.

“The osteological collection is of the greatest importance, as it is by far the largest and most complete ever formed in this country; indeed, Mr. Gray believes that it is as large as all the collections in the country put together, and its exhibition is of the greatest importance to the progress of zoological science, as the classes, orders, families, and genera into which the vertebrated animals are divided, are greatly

dependent on the characters furnished by the variations in the bones, teeth, &c. ; and it is also of great importance to artists, as affording them the best means of studying the forms, attitudes, and characteristic marks of the different animals.

“To give some idea of the importance of the osteological collection, M. Gervais, before he would undertake to continue the late M. de Blainville’s ‘Ostéographie,’ came to England this autumn for the purpose of examining the collection, and assuring himself that there would be no difficulty in his examining and figuring the specimens contained in it ; for, he observed, if this was not the case, it would be impossible for him to undertake the work with justice to his subscribers, as the skeletons were better determined, and it contains many species which were not to be found in any other collection.

“The exhibition of the animals in spirit is required to afford students the means of studying the distribution and arrangement of the animal kingdom, and of determining the species of them.

“Indeed, until these two collections are exhibited to the public, and arranged in the same order as the stuffed animals now shown, the students visiting the Museum may be considered as being deprived of half the assistance in their studies which the collections might, and indeed ought to afford them.”

“British Museum, February 11th, 1852.”

“Mr. Gray and Mr. Waterhouse beg to report to the Trustees, that they hope, if any new building should be undertaken, that space would be found for the exhibition of the collection of skeletons of vertebrated animals.

“The exhibition of this collection is of the greatest importance to the progress of zoological and palæontological science ; first for the scientific arrangement and determination of the genera and species of recent vertebrated animals ; and, secondly, for the determination and identification of the fossil species.

“Mr. Gray and Mr. Waterhouse further beg to observe, that they believe that such a collection is very interesting to the general visitors, and most instructive, as enabling them to understand the fossil remains ; and it is also of great importance to artists, as it would assist them to draw the different animals on true principles. These facts are proved to Mr. Gray and Mr. Waterhouse by the number of inquiries that are made after the few skulls which were formerly exhibited in the first room of the northern Zoological Gallery, and the number of persons who now daily come to consult the collection in the basement for scientific purposes, and are also assured of the popular desire of seeing such a collection by the number of persons who visit the celebrated Osteological Museums of Paris and Leyden, where it is of as great interest as the stuffed collections.”

“June 26th, 1851.”

“Mr. Gray, in conformity with the minute of the Trustees of the 21st of June, 1851, begs to report that he regrets he has no means of giving a very accurate reply to the first part of the minute, as he

has no estimate of the number of specimens of the various classes of animals existing in the collection of 1836.

"Mr. Gray believes that he will not be very far wrong when he states, first, that the zoological collection is now at least ten times as numerous in kinds and specimens as it was in the year 1836; and secondly, that nearly three times as much space is now devoted to its display and arrangement. He begs to add, that nearly one-half of the additional specimens are kept in rooms on the basement, which are only accessible to the public on special permission."

of the Royal
from the
"July 5th, 1851.

"In 1836 the zoological collections occupied 13,745 square feet; in 1851 they occupy 36,600 square feet. To arrange the present collections to be accessible to the visitors, they would require at least 20,000 more.

"N.B. This is independent of the space that would be required if the recent osteological specimens and the fossil ones were arranged together, so as to make them useful to the zoologist and paleontologist."

Some of our contemporaries, while they press the necessity of giving greater space to the Natural-History collection in the British Museum, at the same time advocate the principle of centralization, and would merge the various public collections into this one. We cannot think this advisable. In the first place, the resources of the British Museum alone always have been, and are always likely to be, more than a match for its accommodation; and in the second place, however useful it may be to have Societies centralized under one roof, it should be remembered that it is a very different thing, and may not be so useful, to have various collections merged into one collection. Keepers and conservators are but men, and have their whims and oddities, likings and dislikings, personal or otherwise, very much like other people. Suppose, fifty years hence, that all the public zoological specimens in England are gathered together into the British Museum, and are placed under the curatorship of Director A. Suppose that you and Director A are working at the same point, or have had a controversy in print, accompanied with personalities (such things have been known to occur in the scientific world), do you expect that peculiar facilities will be afforded you for examining that collection, if you want to do so? Not if you know human nature. And therefore we maintain that it is a very good thing not to centralize too much; to be able to go to Director B, curator of the other zoological collection—who is not working at the same point, or who is on very good terms with you, or who will at any rate help you, because he is not too fond of A.

Centralize books, statues, pictures, then, as much as you please, for centralization facilitates access, but beware how you centralize Natural-History collections, or indeed any others whose nature is such, that a wide discretion must be left to the curator in permitting or denying examination.